

A Shared Responsibility

Recommendations for Increasing
Family and Community Involvement in Schools

Maryland's Parent Advisory Council (M-PAC)
Final Report to the Maryland State Board of Education
August 2005



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MESSAGE FROM THE MARYLAND SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

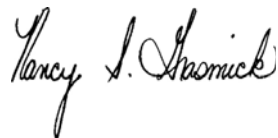
Dear Reader,

In 2003, I convened Maryland's Parent Advisory Council (M-PAC) because I believe in the powerful influence of parents, family, and the community on children's learning. Although Maryland had already undertaken several initiatives to increase involvement, I felt strongly that the state needed a long-term vision and plan for increasing involvement in public schools. And I felt just as strongly that this vision and plan not be created by the Department in isolation. I needed to hear from people who are, as they say, "in the field"—parents, teachers, principals, community members, activists. Thus, M-PAC was conceived.

Words can't express the respect I hold for M-PAC members and the work they have done. I am especially grateful to M-PAC Chair Esther Parker, who is bold in leadership and tireless in promoting M-PAC's work to stakeholders and policymakers across Maryland.

Although M-PAC has completed its task, the Department's work is, in many ways, just beginning. We must now take these recommendations and give them legs. I have told M-PAC members that this report must not become "another dream on the shelf," crowded out by competing demands. We must now gather together—policymakers, parents, educators, advocates, and community leaders—to make the collective vision of M-PAC members a reality in Maryland public schools.

Sincerely,



Nancy S. Grasmick
State Superintendent of Schools

MESSAGE FROM THE M-PAC CHAIR

Dear Reader,

Many states have convened groups to discuss family and community involvement in education, but M-PAC is unique. Rather than a group of educators with a few parent representatives, we are a group of parents with educator representatives. And, due to a survey of thousands of Maryland parents, our direction has been parent-driven. This was no accident. In fact, it was by Superintendent Grasmick's design. By convening M-PAC, and then by giving us the space and time necessary to do our work, Dr. Grasmick demonstrated her commitment to, and respect for, family involvement in schools.

I must also recognize here the Department's staff to M-PAC. Their superb planning and logistical support allowed M-PAC members to concentrate fully on the task at hand. Many thanks to Maureen Moran, Sandra Toomey, JoAnne Carter, Linda Bazerjian, Ann Chafin, Rosemary Johnston, Marlo Lemon, Barbara Scherr, Tom Rhoades, Valerie Ashton, Andrea Lewis, Marlo Lemon, Larry Rogers, Natasha Miller, Cindy Schaefer, Pamela Brockington, Sheila Cox, Sharon Williamson, and Lauren Proutt. And, of course, many thanks to the unsung heroes of every M-PAC meeting—facilitators Martha "Marti" Pogonowski, Lois Sanders, and Cindy McNamara.

For their invaluable guidance, I give special thanks to Adam Kernan-Schloss, President of KSA-Plus Communications, and Soo Hong, Gordon M. Ambach Policy Fellow from the Council of Chief State School Officers.

M-PAC has spent nearly two years studying the current state of family and school involvement in Maryland and identifying ways to increase the quantity and quality of it. The group took its work very seriously. The subcommittees spent long hours conducting research, writing analyses, and discussing their findings. The Main Council spent many nights and weekends analyzing the work of the subcommittees, discussing it, and adding to it, until we arrived at a final product.

I am very proud of M-PAC members and their dedication. It was an honor to be their Chair. I am also very proud of this report. There is no question in my mind that these recommendations have the potential to transform our schools. Please join us in supporting these recommendations. Together, we can make a difference in children's lives.

Sincerely,



Esther Parker
Chair, Maryland's Parent Advisory Council
President, Maryland PTA

MEMBERSHIP

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Ms. Esther Parker—Chair	Ms. Jean Lewis—Howard County
Rev. Vaughn L. Adams, Sr.—Queen Anne's and Caroline counties	Mr. Samuel Macer*—Baltimore County
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**Subcommittee Chairs*

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Mr. Carl Alexander	Mr. Donnie Green	Ms. Marva Mitchell
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Mrs. Nomsa Elizabeth Geleta	Ms. Tonya Miles	Mr. Frank Wise
Ms. Susan Hahn	Mr. Scott Nicewarner	

Advisors to M-PAC

Mr. Adam Kernan-Schloss, President KSA-Plus Communications
Ms. Soo Hong, Gordon M. Ambach Policy Fellow, Council of Chief State School Officers

HISTORY & CHARGE

State Superintendent of Schools Nancy S. Grasmick established Maryland's Parent Advisory Council (M-PAC) in fall 2003. She charged M-PAC with making recommendations on how the Maryland State Department of Education can meet the family-involvement goal (Goal 5) and objectives from its strategic plan, *Achievement Matters Most*.

Goal 5: Families will be involved in education.

Objectives:

- 1. School systems and schools will communicate more frequently and clearly with families and communities.*
- 2. Schools will help parents and legal guardians enhance their parenting skills and will share with them activities to promote academic success.*
- 3. All school systems will adopt a family involvement policy aligned with the state's.*
- 4. Schools will help parents and legal guardians improve school and student performance.*

M-PAC's scope included state, local, and school-based policies and implementation strategies. Its work began with a parent survey developed by Soo Hong, Policy Fellow from the Council of Chief State School Officers. The survey was distributed to and collected from thousands of parents. The survey feedback directed the work of the three subcommittees. The M-PAC Main Council oversaw the work of the three subcommittees, which were organized around the following categories: parent involvement and its impact on student achievement; communication and partnership through non-traditional channels such as community and faith-based groups; and education policy issues. Each subcommittee was asked to address the overall goals according to the parameters of its area of responsibility.

Subcommittee members met once or twice monthly to delve into the issues. They conducted research, listened to presentations from state and national experts, provided the Main Council regular progress reports, and produced final reports. The Main Council guided the subcommittees in their work, analyzed their reports, discussed them in detail, and built on the subcommittee work to create preliminary recommendations. Chair Esther Parker presented the preliminary recommendations to the State Board of Education in February 2005.

From March through May 2005, M-PAC held public forums in all 24 school systems to allow the public an opportunity to review and provide feedback on the preliminary recommendations. The public forums were well publicized—in multiple languages and formats—and yielded impressive turnouts in many locales. Diverse groups of parents, educators, and other stakeholders attended. Their feedback was considered carefully by the Main Council and used to finalize the recommendations in this report.

With publication of this report, the current M-PAC has completed its work. However, a new, smaller advisory group will carry on the work of the original M-PAC. This new group will monitor implementation of the M-PAC recommendations and gather and communicate best practices in increasing family and community involvement in schools.

VISION & PRINCIPLES

ision

Parents, families, educators, and community members work together as real partners, hold themselves mutually accountable, and have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to succeed at **improving the achievement of all students.**

Underlying Principles

To achieve this vision we embrace these principles:

- ◆ Parents, educators, and communities are mutually accountable for improving student achievement by supporting parent involvement. This shared responsibility should be monitored and annually reported on by the Maryland State Department of Education.
- ◆ Schools must offer a welcoming, trustful, and engaging environment.
- ◆ The Maryland State Department of Education, institutions of higher learning, local school systems, and schools must provide ongoing training so that parents and educators can be full partners, informed decision-makers, and effective advocates for children.
- ◆ Schools and school systems must respond to the increasing needs of the state's diverse families and communities.
- ◆ Parents must support their child's learning at home and in school and must serve as their child's advocate.
- ◆ Parents, educators, and community members must be advocates for all children.

PREAMBLE

The case for involvement

Thirty years of research show that family involvement is a powerful influence on student achievement. When families are involved in education—such as organizing and monitoring children’s time, helping with homework, discussing school matters, and reading to them—children tend to perform better academically than their peers. They earn higher grades and test scores than students with less involved families; attend school and complete homework more regularly; are better behaved; and are more likely to graduate high school and attend college.

Research also shows us that what a family does is more important to student success than what a family is or earns. That is, family involvement exceeds parents’ education and household income as the most reliable predictor of academic achievement. It all boils down to this: when parents are involved in education, their children do better in school and in life. That’s an enduring power families have; it’s the kind of power Maryland schools must capitalize on. M-PAC’s recommendations are designed to help schools and families do that.

**“Education is
too important
to be left
solely to
educators.”**

Francis Keppel,
U.S. Commissioner of
Education, 1962-1965

A shared responsibility

M-PAC has been a collaborative effort among parents, educators, activists, community members and others for whom public education is a concern. For nearly two years, the Main Council and subcommittee members worked together—sharing, learning, deliberating, and negotiating—to arrive at the recommendations in this report.

So, too, M-PAC intends for the execution of these recommendations to be a joint activity—and a shared responsibility—among the home, school, and community. At forums across the state, educators reviewing the preliminary recommendations said, in essence, “We cannot do this alone.” M-PAC emphatically affirms this position. Certainly, the school is a good starting point for building momentum, and a critical partner in sustaining it. But families and community members—e.g., childcare providers, business leaders, faith-based institution representatives—must also be in the school and “at the table,” and the state and local school systems must provide leadership and support, if Maryland is to bring about the changes proposed in this report.

The Maryland State Board of Education recognized the importance of involvement from all areas—school, home, and community—when it adopted in October 2001 the Maryland Family Involvement Policy. Crafted by M-PAC’s predecessor, the Maryland Family Focus Council, the Family Involvement Policy broadly defines roles and expectations for involvement. The policy specifically calls for schools to better involve parents in the educational process, for parents to provide a home atmosphere conducive to learning, and for community members and organizations to be involved in the learning process. See page 9 for the full text of the Maryland Family

Involvement Policy, which M-PAC members fully support. In fact, they specifically requested that the Policy be included in this report.

Building an organizational structure

Throughout their discussions, M-PAC members repeatedly emphasized the need for an organizational structure—at the state, school system, and school levels—that supports family and community involvement. M-PAC’s emphasis on an organizational structure is supported by National PTA standards to bolster parent involvement in education and by the Six Types of Family Involvement Framework by Dr. Joyce Epstein, Director of the National Network of Partnership Schools and the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. The organizational structure would ensure the necessary processes, resources, and opportunities are in place.

Without state, local, and school level organizational structures, Maryland is unlikely to see any real change. The recommendations in the Leadership section of this report support this organizational structure.

MARYLAND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT POLICY

The Maryland State Board of Education adopted this policy as a resolution on October 30, 2001.

WHEREAS, the Maryland State Board of Education recognizes that parents and families are a young child's first teachers, and that when children enter school the responsibility for their education is then shared with the school and the entire community; and

WHEREAS, the Maryland State Board of Education recognizes that creating positive home, school, and community partnerships is essential to carrying out this shared responsibility successfully; and

WHEREAS, the Maryland State Board of Education recognizes that in order to accomplish the mission of Maryland's schools to successfully educate all students, the community, schools, parents, and students must work as knowledgeable partners;

NOW THEREFORE, the Maryland State Board of Education adopts this policy statement for key stakeholders in ensuring quality education for all students:

The State Board believes that schools must create an environment that is conducive to learning and supports strong comprehensive family involvement programs. Schools will strive to involve parents and family members of children at all ages and grade levels by providing and respecting a variety of types and degrees of involvement, while recognizing the diverse needs of families in their community. Schools will inform and involve parents and caregivers in children's learning activities and academic decisions at home and in school. Further, schools will establish high levels of cooperation and coordination with other community agencies that provide services to children and families.

Parents and other family members are the child's first teachers. They will be encouraged to provide a home atmosphere conducive to learning and express to their children the importance of education. Further, parents and family members will be expected to cooperate with teachers and school administrators in matters relating to their child's education and will be encouraged to participate meaningfully in school programs, program planning, and decision making. Schools also need the support of other members of the community, including parent organizations, public libraries, businesses, and faith-based organizations to promote effective education. Community groups will be helped to recognize that investment in education is investment in the community. Further, community groups will be encouraged to help schools develop and implement innovative programs that promote educational goals and support high academic expectations for all students.

The Maryland State Department of Education has the role of fostering wider and more substantive family and community involvement by identifying and sharing information with parents and families about effective educational programs. It will also provide information on funding sources for the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs. Further, it will develop professional development programs on family/school/community involvement for school staff and families. The Maryland State Department of Education will develop programs that nurture and support parents/families by enhancing their parenting skills and encouraging them to provide academic

assistance to their children. Special efforts will be made to reach those who did not have a positive school experience or for whom English is not their native language.

The Maryland State Board of Education and the Maryland Department of Education will continue to support and assist schools and local school systems in developing, implementing, and evaluating policies and programs that involve all parents and families at all grade levels. It will seek to collaborate with faith-based organizations and other community agencies serving children and families to encourage parent and family involvement in the lives of children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The recommendations are presented in five themes: communication, leadership, training, partnership, and accountability. These themes arose from the Main Council's discussions of the subcommittee reports. Because the recommendations are often cross-cutting and the themes so interwoven, some recommendations would be equally appropriate in multiple themes. The purpose of the categorization was to provide structure to the recommendations. It is important to note that the recommendations are not prioritized. Each recommendation builds on the other, thereby resisting attempts at ranking.

However, the Main Council does emphasize the importance of one recommendation, feeling strongly that it is the linchpin for achieving the rest of the recommendations. This recommendation is the second bulleted item in the Leadership section: "Ensure the establishment of an organizational structure that includes personnel at the state, local school system, and school levels. This structure will oversee leadership, training, monitoring, and support for family and community involvement and partnerships." The Main Council believes that this particular recommendation must be implemented if Maryland is to make substantive improvements in family and community involvement.

Readers may notice that many recommendations are "encouraged" rather than "required." In these cases, the Main Council felt that it was either not appropriate or not possible to make the recommendation a requirement. The group and Dr. Grasmick recognize that, in practice, encouraged items often receive much less attention than those that are mandated. To help maintain the focus on family and community involvement, Dr. Grasmick plans to appoint a standing advisory group that will monitor progress of state and local implementation of the M-PAC recommendations. This standing group will also gather best practices in local school systems and facilitate sharing of these practices across the state.

Lastly, as it was not part of the group's charge, M-PAC consciously omitted any references to funding in this report. The group believes that the responsibility for identifying funds to support family and community involvement lies with the State Department of Education and State Board of Education.

1. Communication

Rationale

Clear, regular, two-way communication is the linchpin of successful school-home partnerships. If schools seek to increase involvement, they must communicate to families and communities their rights and responsibilities and how they can support schools. Likewise, families and communities

contribute to school improvement by providing feedback on—or directly shaping—policies, programs, student achievement, and more.

Communicating clearly and regularly takes time and careful planning. The task becomes even more challenging when one considers the diversity of Maryland families. More than 100 languages are spoken in the state. Students hail from varied racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Family structure and characteristics vary as well—two-parent, single-parent, and no-parent families, military families, single-income or dual-income families, families with step-parents and step-siblings, the list goes on. Educators are faced with the monumental task of communicating effectively with an amazingly diverse group of people.

The following recommendations take such diversity into account and support clear, regular, two-way communication between schools, families, and communities.

Recommendations

To improve parents' ability to be involved in schools, the Maryland State Department of Education should...

- ◆ Communicate — using varied methods, media, resources, and languages — the rights and responsibilities of parents to develop and respond to education policy, procedures, and practices at the state, local school system, and school levels.

local school systems and schools should...

- ◆ Hold regular, meaningful parent/teacher conferences that address the full range of issues affecting student achievement.
- ◆ Using varied methods, media, and languages, regularly provide parents information on their rights and responsibilities, on grading and discipline policies, and on the importance of meaningful parent involvement.
- ◆ Using varied methods, media, and languages, provide parents curriculum and program information *by grade* and suggest steps for improving individual student achievement. A committee of parents and educators should review the information to ensure that it is understandable to all parents.

11. Leadership

Rationale

Strong leadership is essential for any major reform effort. M-PAC members held lengthy discussions about the importance of leadership at the state, district, school, parent, and community levels. A critical part of leadership, group members decided, is ensuring the necessary processes and organizational structure are in place to involve all stakeholders. After all, there are already some strong parent involvement policies in place across the state. What is somewhat lacking, group members noted, is the implementation of such policies. This could be improved with more defined

processes, and with more structured encouragement and modeling of family involvement initiatives from the State and local school systems.

Hence, the following recommendations are designed to create leadership opportunities and to build an organizational structure to support family involvement. Implementing these recommendations will be a strong show of leadership for the State and local school systems.

Recommendations

To build the leadership and organizational structure necessary to support family and community involvement in schools, the Maryland State Board of Education and/or Maryland State Department of Education should ...

- ◆ Initiate and/or support legislation that would place at least two parents with a child attending a Maryland public school on the State Board of Education.
- ◆ Ensure the establishment of an organizational structure that includes personnel at the state, local school system, and school levels. This structure will oversee leadership, training, monitoring, and support for family and community involvement and partnerships.
- ◆ Encourage local school systems to establish parent involvement advisory groups to advise their local boards of education on parent involvement concerns, practices, and research. These groups would also communicate board policies, parent involvement strategies, and research to parents and communities.

III. Training

Rationale

The Main Council and the work of the subcommittees made clear the imperative for training—not only for teachers, but for principals, parents, central office staff, community members, and others with a stake in improving schools.

Consider that math teachers are required to understand and teach math. Prospective math teachers take relevant coursework and receive pre-service training in math instruction. Experienced math teachers hone their skills with regular professional development. If teachers and other educators are expected to facilitate relationships and partnerships with the family/community, then they must understand communication and involvement strategies. Specific, ongoing training is required to build this understanding. Likewise, parents and other stakeholders require training to become full partners. They need to learn how to contribute to school improvement teams, how to advocate for children, how to help individual students academically, and more.

Recommendations

To increase the amount and effectiveness of family and community involvement in schools, the Maryland State Department of Education should...

- ◆ Assess local school systems' parent and community involvement training needs, and then provide school systems appropriate technical assistance, training, resources, and mentoring.

- ◆ Encourage local school systems to include family and community involvement measures in their local assessment of training needs.
- ◆ Work with local school systems, colleges, and universities to develop and offer coursework on family involvement for current teachers, administrators, and other school staff.
- ◆ Work with colleges and universities to develop a course in parent and community involvement that is a requirement for all undergraduate education students seeking teaching certification in Maryland.

the Maryland State Board of Education should...

- ◆ Encourage local boards of education to support parent and community involvement training for central office staff, school-based staff, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members.

local school systems should...

- ◆ Provide or ensure that schools provide job-embedded staff training that addresses issues related to individual student needs, family advocacy, cultural proficiency, and — to ensure a family-friendly atmosphere in the school — parent involvement and customer service skills.
- ◆ Provide or ensure that schools provide training for parents and community members on leadership and effective involvement with schools. To maximize access to training, it should be offered at schools, at additional sites that are convenient to the community, and on the Web.

IV. Partnership

Rationale

“It takes a village to raise a child,” is an oft-used phrase, with good reason. A family’s influence can reach only so far, so positive influences and supports from the community are needed for children to realize their potential. Further, some children and families have unmet health and welfare needs that serve as barriers to achievement. Working together, schools, families, and communities can remove such barriers and set the stage for accelerated academic achievement.

Home-school-community collaborations, however, are more than supportive services or mentoring programs—though these are invaluable. True partnerships involve mutual respect, two-way communication, shared decision-making, and shared accountability. The recommendations presented here are designed to support strong partnerships among Maryland families, schools, and communities.

Recommendations

To encourage and support schools’ partnerships with families and communities, the Maryland State Department of Education should...

- ◆ Encourage all committees and task forces at the state, local school system, and school levels to offer an opportunity for participation to at least two parents (or 25% of the membership) with a child attending a Maryland public school.
- ◆ Encourage public schools to collaborate with community agencies to provide in schools such services as wellness centers, health care (physical and mental), social services, and childcare.
- ◆ Develop programs and incentives for more effective communication and partnerships (parent and community, including businesses) at the state, local school system, and school levels.

V. Accountability

Rationale

Accountability was a recurring theme throughout the Main Council's discussions and the three subcommittee reports. Modern families and school staffs have strict time constraints and multiple priorities. M-PAC is sympathetic to these demands. But, to make sure involvement does not get lost in the shuffle, accountability measures are necessary. As several M-PAC members said, "We treasure what we measure," and "What gets measured gets done."

This call for accountability was accompanied by an admission that involvement is not the responsibility of educators alone. Rather, it is a responsibility shared among schools, families, and communities. M-PAC believes that accountability measures are useful tools in improving student achievement, but that they should not be used or perceived as a means of placing blame on any particular group or person. Accordingly, the group arrived at several recommendations (some required, some encouraged) designed to change attitudes and actions. These accountability recommendations will help move away from the notion of family involvement as an "add-on" and toward the acceptance of involvement as a valuable, essential strategy to improve student achievement.

Recommendations

To support and measure the effectiveness of family and community involvement in schools, the Maryland State Board of Education and/or Maryland State Department of Education should...

- ◆ Adopt the State Board's 2001 Family Involvement Policy Resolution into the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR). Require local school systems to align their family involvement policies with this COMAR regulation.
- ◆ Develop a set of survey questions — that could stand alone or be incorporated into existing local school system survey instruments — to assess annually the effectiveness of parent and community involvement policies and practices. Input from local school systems and advocacy and community groups must be sought in the development of the survey. This survey information should be used to design and modify parent/family involvement activities detailed in each local school system's Master Plan and annual update.
- ◆ Establish benchmarks — in collaboration with local systems and advocacy and community groups — for local school systems and schools to use in measuring the effectiveness and progress of their parent and community involvement policies and practices. Once these benchmarks are established, progress should be reported in the Maryland School Performance Report.
- ◆ Encourage local school systems to factor parent and family involvement into the annual performance evaluations of school administrators and staff.

Concluding Statement

Maryland's Parent Advisory Council, and its subcommittees, crafted the preceding recommendations with much research, discussion, and deliberation. Members emphasized that full implementation of these recommendations is fundamental if Maryland is to increase the quantity and quality of family and community involvement in public schools. Information on the forthcoming M-PAC monitoring implementation committee will be published on the M-PAC section of the Maryland State Department of Education Web site at www.marylandpublicschools.org.

SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS

As described on page five, M-PAC's Main Council oversaw the work of three subcommittees: Education Policy, Non-traditional Communication Methods, and Parent Involvement. These subcommittees met monthly or more frequently to share research, listen to presentations from state and national experts, and carry on discussions. The subcommittees submitted recommendations to the Main Council for consideration, and most were incorporated into the final report and recommendations. M-PAC members believe that these subcommittee reports are of great value independently; therefore, they are appended here in their entirety.

EDUCATION POLICY SUBCOMMITTEE FINAL REPORT

Final Report to Maryland's Parent Advisory Council December 15, 2004

Presented by Mary Jo Neil, Chair

1. Introduction

The Education Policy Subcommittee was charged with generating recommendations to enhance parent involvement and communication as it relates to general academic policies. The recommendations were developed as a result of elements that subcommittee members felt were missing at the state, local, and school levels.

The subcommittee had two areas of focus that were provided by the Main Council. They are:

- *Propose a process by which parents may help shape local and state policies on academic achievement, discipline, attendance, and other issues; and*
- *Outline parents' rights and responsibilities in deciding educational policies.*

Consistent throughout the recommendations are common themes addressing parents' rights and responsibilities, training for both parents and professionals, and assessing the impact of policies. Other organizations such as the National Parent Teachers Association (PTA), Maryland PTA, and National Network of Partnership Schools have already designed models and tools to assist local school systems and schools in their efforts to engage family, school, and community involvement. The subcommittee believes that leadership must be provided by the Maryland State Department of Education and that they must serve as a role model in order for family, school, and community involvement policies and practices to be fully developed and implemented at the state, local school system, and school levels.

2. Preface to the Recommendations

The recommendations presented by the Education Policy Subcommittee evolved through a process that included information gathering, brainstorming, and reaching consensus. Through the use of a facilitated process, the subcommittee was able to engage in meaningful discussions on a variety of matters. Guest speakers were invited to share information on education policy at the federal, state, and local school system levels. The most current legislation at the federal level is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The subcommittee learned about the emphasis on parent involvement, particularly in Title I, Part A. Additionally, Maryland State Department of Education staff provided resources and research. Through a combination of resources gathered and the expertise of parents on the subcommittee, sharing both their personal and professional experiences, these recommendations were generated.

3. Recommendations

We recommend:

3.1. Adopting the current family involvement resolution into policy and establishing a position to support and monitor the implementation of family, school, and community involvement programs, initiatives, and training across Maryland.

- ◇ *The Maryland State Board of Education will adopt the Maryland State Department of Education Family Involvement Resolution as a State Board of Education policy that would become part of the Code of Maryland Regulations.*
- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will designate a person dedicated exclusively to monitoring the implementation of family, school, and community involvement programs, initiatives, and training across the state.*

Rationale:

Research supports that the involvement of parents and families as true partners in the educational process is a more powerful education reform strategy than any other. One of the largest advocacy organizations for parents and teachers is the PTA. The National PTA was instrumental in advocating that the United States Department of Education adopt a goal addressing parent involvement: *“Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children”* (<http://www.ed.gov/G2K/teachers/negs.html>). Furthermore, in 2001, as part of its strategic plan for public education, the Maryland State Department of Education adopted Goal 5, Involved Parents. Additionally, Title I, Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires that each local school system and school receiving Title I funds have a parent involvement policy. Policies must be jointly developed with, approved by, and distributed to parents. Additionally, each Title I school’s policy must be a part of its Title I plan and include a description of how the school will implement specific components of the law (*Title I as a Tool for Parent Involvement*, Center for Law in Education).

In October 2001, *Maryland’s Family Involvement Policy* was approved by the Maryland State Board of Education as a resolution, but not part of the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR). Many schools and local school systems have either drafted or adopted a parent involvement policy. However, schools and local school systems can not be held accountable for implementation of their policies since the existing state family involvement policy is a resolution. Adopting the current policy into the COMAR will ensure that all local school systems and schools adopt family involvement policies that align with the State Department of Education’s.

Leadership must be provided by the Maryland State Department of Education in order for family, school, and community involvement policies and practices to be developed, implemented, and monitored at all levels. This is particularly timely since parent involvement is imbedded throughout the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requiring that schools receiving Title I funds have a person responsible for ensuring that parent involvement activities are implemented. As noted in the existing Maryland’s Policy on Family Involvement, the Maryland State Department of Education has the role of fostering wider and more substantive family and community involvement by identifying

and sharing information with schools, local school systems, parents, and families about effective educational programs. This would require at least one position to serve as the Family Involvement Coordinator at the state level. Responsibilities would include: providing technical assistance (training, guidance, mentorship, etc.) to, and creating programs and developing strategies for local school systems, schools, and the community at large. It would also ensure that family, school, and community involvement policies and practices are fully implemented, and that the Maryland State Department of Education would provide the leadership and model necessary to support and monitor family involvement policies and practices statewide. Creating such a position can only strengthen the commitment of the state to parent involvement and the critical role parents share in the success of their child.

3.2. Communicating parents' rights and responsibilities and providing opportunities for parent orientation.

- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will establish and implement multiple avenues for communication in varied formats and languages that publicize the rights and responsibilities of parents¹ in Maryland in terms of developing and responding to education policy, procedures, and practices at the state, local school system, and school levels.*
- ◇ *Local school systems and schools will provide ongoing parent orientation (in necessary languages and mediums) that includes, but is not limited to, an explanation of parents' rights and responsibilities, grading and discipline policies, and the importance of meaningful parental involvement.*

Rationale:

A common educational goal across the state is to enhance achievement for all students and to prepare them for success in today's global community. Local school systems and schools serve a wide range of families with diverse needs and from diverse cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds. Therefore, involvement varies from family to family and can take many different forms — from communicating with teachers and helping children with homework to participating in school policymaking groups (Henderson, A.T., & Berla, N., 1994).

Information on parental rights and responsibilities must be translated into multiple languages, produced, and shared in a variety of formats including printed materials (newsletters, newspapers, brochures, etc.), Websites, and informational sessions held outside the school building to ensure non-English-speaking parents are fully informed. For example, in one local school system where there is a high Korean population, the system offers a Back-to-School night for Korean families. This event provides an overview of the local school system's policies and practices. Additionally, several school systems provide accommodations for parents requiring translators or interpreters.

¹ “(a) General. As used in this part, the term *parent* means: (1) A natural or adoptive parent of a child; (2) A guardian but not the State if the child is a ward of the State; (3) A person acting in the place of a parent (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child's welfare); or (4) A surrogate parent who has been appointed in accordance with §300.515. (b) Foster parent. Unless State law prohibits a foster parent from acting as a parent, a State may allow a foster parent to act as a parent under Part B of the Act if--(1) The natural parents' authority to make educational decisions on the child's behalf has been extinguished under State law; and (2) The foster parent--(i) Has an ongoing, long-term parental relationship with the child; (ii) Is willing to make the educational decisions required of parents; under the Act; and (iii) Has no interest that would conflict with the interests of the child.” Source 34 Code of Federal Regulation §300.20 (IDEA)

Research supports that parent involvement increases when the administration and staff of a school communicate a genuine desire to involve parents by considering parents' needs (Collins, A., Cooper, J.L., & Whitmore, E., 1995). For instance, when schools accommodate parents' work schedules by arranging meetings at times when parents can be available, the partnership is more successful (Ballen, J. and Moles, O., 1994). Efforts must continuously be made by local school systems and schools to give all parents, including non-English speaking families, the information they need to participate fully in their children's education, as well as have a meaningful role in the process of planning for and implementing school change. Parents must have opportunities to become oriented in the decision-making process so they can participate in the development of and respond to educational policies, procedures, and practices at the state, local school system, and school level. Issues related to transitioning is another example of how local school systems and schools can help decrease the barriers that parents may experience and create a more welcoming environment. Parent orientation and engagement is the gateway to meaningful parent involvement.

3.3. Securing parent representation on the Maryland State Board of Education and on all educational committees and task forces.

- ◇ *At least 25% all state-, local school system-, and school-appointed educational committees or task forces will consist of parents who have a child attending a Maryland public school. At least two parents should be serving at any given time.*
- ◇ *The Maryland State Board of Education will include at least two parents who have a child attending a Maryland public school.*

Rationale:

We must promote and maintain a parent perspective to ensure parents have a voice in the educational decision-making process at all levels. Parent representation is commonly encouraged on the myriad educational committees and task forces across the state and at the local level but is not required. Goal 5 of *Maryland's Plan for Family, School, and Community Involvement* states, "In partnership for student success, parents, schools, and community members will collaborate on educational decisions that affect children, families, and school improvement" (MSDE, 2002). Typically, one parent is identified to represent "all parents" on committees or task forces across the state and at the local school system or school level with no requirement that the parent have a child attending a Maryland public school. It is imperative that we make certain that at least 25% of all state-, local school system-, and school-appointed educational committees or task forces will consist of parents who have a child attending a Maryland public school. At least two parents should be serving at any given time. This will secure genuine parent participation.

The Maryland State Board of Education is made up of 12 members representing various backgrounds, including a student member. All members are voting members. Members may or may not have a child attending a public school at any given time. Members use their knowledge, personal experiences, and expertise as community members to make decisions on education policy. As the student member has a voice for students in Maryland, it is equally important that parents be heard. Reserving a seat for at least two parent members to serve on the Maryland State Board of Education would give parents the opportunity to be involved at the highest level of decision making to promote student success. This will ensure that families will be recognized as full partners in their child's education. Parents must have opportunities to be involved in education policy, procedures, and practices at the state, local school system, and school level.

3.4. Measuring the effectiveness and progress of family, school, and community involvement policies.

- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will require regular review and assessment of the effectiveness of family, school, and community involvement policies, with representation from advocacy and community groups, resulting in the development of an improvement plan incorporated into the Bridge to Excellence Master Plans.*
- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will provide and include benchmarks in the Maryland School Performance Report whereby local school systems and schools will measure the effectiveness and progress of their family, school, and community involvement policies. Results will be posted on the Maryland State Department of Education's Website.*

Rationale:

Title I, Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires local school systems receiving Title I funds to have a parent involvement policy that is jointly developed with, approved by, and distributed to parents. Likewise, each school receiving Title I funds must also have a parent involvement policy as part of its Title I plan. The policy must include a description of how the school will implement specific components of the law (*Title I as a Tool for Parent Involvement*, Center for Law in Education). Each local school system's Bridge to Excellence Master Plan includes its parent involvement policy. The Master Plan is revised yearly. Typically, education specialists representing the state and local school systems review Master Plans. The Maryland State Department of Education should require regular reviews by stakeholders including a family involvement specialist and advocacy and community groups. Having a representative from the field would help to ensure that parent involvement policies at the local school system and school level align with the state's.

To guide and measure the quality of schools' parent involvement policies and initiatives, benchmarks and an assessment tool must be designed. The National Parent Teacher Association and the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University developed a tool to measure parent involvement effectiveness. These existing assessment tools can be used as a model for local school systems and schools as they work to make parents true partners in their children's education. Leadership must be provided from the Maryland State Department of Education to ensure that policies are fully implemented and focused on meeting the needs of parents and the school community.

3.5. Assessing the professional development needs for parental involvement and providing technical assistance to schools and parents.

- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will provide technical assistance, training, resources, and mentorship to equip schools with the necessary tools for meeting the involvement needs of parents, students, teachers, and communities.*
- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will require local school systems to incorporate family, school, and community involvement strategies into professional development needs assessments.*

Rationale:

The Maryland Teacher Professional Development Standards, approved by the Maryland State Board of Education, help to strengthen teaching in Maryland's classrooms through opportunities for learning with peers, strong leadership, adequate resources, and a clear understanding about expectations for teacher quality. Through the myriad requirements imbedded throughout the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it is particularly critical that local school systems and Title I schools receive the appropriate training necessary to ensure that parent involvement activities are being appropriately implemented.

Among the nine standards of professional development, the Maryland State Department of Education defines the standard for family involvement as "professional development that provides teachers with the skills and knowledge to involve families and other community members as partners in the educational process" (MSDE, 2004). Administrators and teachers must have effective, ongoing training and resources in order to support the development of their abilities to create and implement family, school, and community involvement strategies. According to the National Network of Partnership Schools, family, school, and community collaboration "should be an ongoing theme in the in-service professional development of educators..." (Epstein, J., 2002). It is imperative that local school systems and all schools continuously assess the training needs of their staff as they relate to parent involvement. The application of Maryland's Professional Development Standards to all professional development, training, and technical assistance (guidance, mentorship, etc.) will help to ensure the quality of these offerings.

3.6. Developing pre-service and in-service opportunities for parent involvement.

- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will establish partnerships with universities and institutions of higher learning to develop teacher and administrative pre-service requirements that address effective family, school, and community involvement strategies, communication, and inclusion in decision-making at the local school system and school levels.*
- ◇ *The Maryland State Department of Education will offer a credit course to train educators as "Family Involvement Specialists."*

Rationale:

Teacher quality is essential to increased student learning. According to the Harvard Family Study Report, only 22 states have parent involvement in their credentialing standards (Diana Hiatt-Michael, EDO-SP-2001-2). "California is the first and only state that has enacted legislation mandating prospective teachers and certified educators "to serve as active partners with parents and guardians in the education of children" (California Education Code 44291.2, 1993).

Universities and institutions of higher learning are an important component in the preparation, certification, and training of teachers and administrators. Effective school and community partnerships are built upon the diverse cultural backgrounds that are the foundation for all student learning. Even though research supports partnerships between the school and family, there are limited educational opportunities for new teachers through teacher education programs. In order to support student success, administrators and teachers must have and demonstrate the knowledge and skills that allow them to work in partnership with parents, families, and community members.

Training must be provided that addresses strategies on effective parent engagement, communication, and parent participation in decision making at the local school system and school levels.

In addition, research suggests that regardless of the economic, ethnic, or cultural background of families, parent involvement in a child's education is a major factor in determining success in school. Parent involvement contributes to many positive outcomes, such as improved school attendance, improved homework completion rates, decreased violence and substance abuse, and higher graduation rates. Some schools and most local school systems in Maryland have family involvement coordinators or liaisons. Their role is to ensure that parent involvement opportunities are occurring and activities are being implemented. Because there is no formal training on parent involvement, it is essential that the Maryland State Department of Education offer credit courses to train educators as Family Involvement Specialists. This would ensure that educators are equipped with the skills and tools necessary to work with parents as full partners in the education of their children.

4. Summary

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasizes the importance of parent involvement at the state, local school system, and school level. Maryland's parent involvement efforts far exceed those of many states; however, a lot of work remains to be done. It is our belief that all schools should be held to many of the same standards and requirements outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act and required of all schools receiving Title I funds. In order to achieve this, it takes a paradigm shift in our thinking about policy to ensure all parents have meaningful opportunities to participate in their child's education and that all school staff members are provided the appropriate training necessary to work with parents as true partners.

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NON-TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION SUBCOMMITTEE

Final Report to Maryland's Parent Advisory Council December 21, 2004

Presented by: Peter Fernandez

Introduction

The Non-traditional Communication Subcommittee of Maryland's Parent Advisory Council (M-PAC) met monthly from January through November 2004. In addition, the group communicated via e-mail to complete assignments and further review information.

The subcommittee's information-gathering process included: guest speakers and experts, relevant research and articles, collective experiences in members' local communities, and brainstorming activities. The group first answered a series of six guiding questions in its areas of focus (1. Propose new strategies for developing two-way communication with all parents of Maryland's culturally diverse students and 2. Identify and propose strategies to strengthen partnerships that enhance family and community engagement in student learning), then developed preliminary recommendations, narrowed the recommendations through consensus, developed several overarching themes, which serve as the group's core beliefs, and then crafted its final recommendations for the main Council.

Subcommittee members included: parents, school system representatives, teachers, principals, representatives from higher education institutions, representatives from parent- and family-involvement organizations, and business and community members. Additionally, membership represented special-needs students and the cultural and geographic diversity of the state of Maryland. This collective expertise led to three recommendations that the subcommittee strongly believes will enhance the overall state of family, school, and community involvement and partnerships (specifically in the area of communication) at the state, local school system, and school levels.

Preface

In order to assist the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) in reaching Goal 5 of its departmental strategic plan—involving all families in education to ensure the academic success of Maryland's children—and thereby create a collaborative environment that breeds positive family, school, and community involvement at the state, local school system, and school levels, the Non-traditional Communication Subcommittee offers a series of recommendations to the main Council representing six core beliefs that repeatedly surfaced during our group's year-long deliberations. A culture¹ must exist at all levels—from state to school—that views family, school, and community involvement as a necessary ingredient in students' academic achievement. Our subcommittee believes that the following six overarching themes must be present in order for this to occur in a meaningful way, and our three recommendations to the main Council stem from these core beliefs:

¹ atmosphere, institutional environment that embraces and supports change and has the tools necessary to enact change

- Communication, both traditional² and non-traditional³, is an integral part of family, school, and community involvement and must be two-way and available to all members of the school community;
- The business of education cannot be successfully accomplished without partners outside the school, whether they be parents, community organizations, businesses, or other interested parties;
- Technology⁴ must be more broadly defined and utilized in a more efficient manner in order to reach out in traditional and non-traditional ways;
- Professional development⁵ and training⁶ are paramount to imparting the skills necessary for effective communication and collaboration;
- The business maxim, “that which is not measured does not count,” is a truism, and accountability measures must be developed and enforced in order for any recommendations to have the desired outcomes;
- Without some enhancements in current organizational structures at all levels—state, local school system, school, and higher education—the necessary changes will not occur.

Recommendations

- 1a. We recommend that MSDE establish a family, school, and community partnership office consisting of no less than one full-time staff person to provide leadership at the state, higher education, local school system, and school levels, thereby facilitating a more coordinated and collaborative effort.

The office would:

- Identify and share statewide non-traditional strategies for facilitating two-way communication with local school systems and schools in order to:
 - fulfill the foreign-language needs of the school community,
 - recognize and enforce the use of family-friendly language in terms of ethnicity, educational background, and frame of reference in all communication with families,
 - strengthen and refine traditional communication methods, and
 - incorporate technology to improve non-traditional and traditional communication;

² commonly used/known methods of exchanging information

³ any method of communication that goes beyond the normally used method or utilizes a common method in a new or innovative way

⁴ broadly defined as the use of any means of technology that facilitates better communication traditionally or non-traditionally. Not limited to computer-based technology. Examples include but are not limited to:

Telephones (individual calls, conference calls, or automated mass phone messaging); cellular phones; pagers; blackberries; PDAs and other hand-held computer devices; computers (desktop or laptop); Web pages; e-mails; listservs and distribution of newsletters via e-mail; online bulletin boards and chat rooms; mass-produced videotapes, DVDs, audio tapes, or CD-ROMs; PowerPoint presentations; video conferencing; interactive cable television announcements/messages

⁵ Training, workshops, and programs that provide individuals with experiences that will expand and enhance their professional skills and interpersonal interactions (primarily for principals, teachers, secretaries, building maintenance, cafeteria, and central office staff)

⁶ Similar to professional development but targeted toward parents, community volunteers, and non-school- or -system-based individuals. Can also include pre-service teachers, principals, etc., when done at the higher education level

- Develop methods and ideas to cultivate partnerships⁷ between and among schools and community organizations and businesses at all levels, and coordinate statewide meetings of local-school-system-level liaisons to share methods, such as creating guidelines that orient and train school partners and volunteers about needs and expectations;
 - Serve as an ongoing resource for local school systems and schools; and
 - Serve as the catalyst for implementing the already adopted statewide plan⁸ for school, family, and community involvement.
- 1b. We recommend that each local school system establish a family, school, and community involvement office consisting of no less than one full-time staff member with similar goals and responsibilities as the state office but focused on the local level. The office would:
- Establish and oversee a system-wide team of school-based community/ family liaisons and/or team-based family, school, and community involvement groups at each school or within each feeder system⁹. (School-based community/family liaisons will be further outlined in 1c);
 - Serve as a liaison to the statewide group that meets regularly with the designated state office representative;
 - Monitor the parent involvement provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Bridge to Excellence Act at the school level. This already occurs at the state level through the Title I office; and
 - Implement the already adopted statewide plan for school, family, and community involvement.
- 1c. We recommend that each school system place a community/family liaison in each school or feeder system who demonstrates an understanding of the school community. The liaison would:
- Head up a school- and/or feeder-based team of other staff members (administrators, teachers, parents, office and maintenance staff, community members, and others);
 - Establish partnerships and publicize school events within the community;
 - Establish, with the team, major needs in order to target partnerships;
 - Contact businesses and organizations about school needs and avenues for partnerships;
 - Facilitate face-to-face meetings with parents, businesses, and other organizations;
 - Integrate and deliver information throughout the community;
 - Share information with the local school system;
 - Ensure that information from the local school system reaches the community; and
 - Ensure systematic coordination at schools among parent groups/PTAs, businesses, families, and community groups.

Rationale

Throughout the subcommittee's work, it became evident that there are many examples of effective family, school, and community involvement both within the state of Maryland and around the nation. However, it also became clear that a need exists for a more coordinated

⁷ a mutually beneficial relationship between individuals/organizations such as educators, families, students, community organizations, businesses, and other entities that enhances the education of Maryland public school students with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement and educational attainment

⁸see publication and policy Maryland Family Involvement Policy adopted by the Maryland State Board of Education on October 30, 2001.

⁹ series of schools in a designated neighborhood or area—usually an elementary, middle, and high school—in which students progress from one school to the next

approach at the state, local school system, and school levels not only to create and evaluate policy but also to share best practices, and perhaps institutionalize those that truly stand out.

While decades' worth of research seems to point to the importance of family involvement, it has been viewed as an "add-on" in the current organizational structure and needs to become integrated into the fabric of policy and practice. Recommendations 1a and 1b provide for an update in that organizational structure focused on providing leadership, expertise, and resources to all parties involved.

This recommendation receives our highest endorsement because without this organizational structure, it would be extremely difficult to proceed with the rest of the recommendations. This recommendation incorporates all of our core beliefs related to organizational structure, communication, partnership, technology, accountability, and professional development and training.

2. We recommend the establishment of training for pre-service teachers and administrators, ongoing professional development and training for all school staff¹⁰ and central office staff, and training for families and community volunteers on topics such as:
 - technology (as it relates to family, school, and community communication),
 - non-traditional communication methods,
 - cultural needs¹¹,
 - customer service, and
 - other areas related to successful family, school, and community involvement.

The State Board of Education and local boards of education should adopt the following regulations into the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) and local regulations:

- All pre-service teachers and administrators must receive higher-education-level training in communicating with families and community members and in general family involvement.
- All local school system staff and school-based staff must receive high-quality, ongoing professional development and training in these areas. Attendance at these training sessions is required.
- Training must include the use of technology (as defined by this committee) and other means needed to reach families of varied backgrounds, schedules, and needs. For instance, school staff must be proficient in all varieties of technological communication employed by the school and local system.
- All families and community members must be offered training (through workshops or other means) based on identified community needs. This training would be characterized by:

¹⁰ from principals, teachers, and front office secretaries to building maintenance and cafeteria staff

¹¹ not limited to culture as defined by ethnicity; includes culture related to views of school and schooling, authority figures, government, and the role of family

- an emphasis on providing families greater access to information (e.g., training in how to use the Internet and how to access the Internet for free (e.g., evening access to school computer labs, public libraries, and local college computer labs);
- flexible locations (e.g., using space provided by employers, faith organizations, communities, or the government); and
- flexible times (e.g., scheduling training sessions on evenings and weekends).

Rationale

Once an organizational structure is created, the next logical step, in our collective thinking, is to provide a key resource: professional development and training. If we want teachers to understand and teach mathematics, we require them to learn about mathematics. How can we expect any less in the area of communication?

More than 100 languages are spoken in the state of Maryland. We have students and parents from every conceivable ethnic and economic background—two-parent families, single-parent families, no-parent families, working parents, military parents, and more. Still, we expect teachers and other school-based staff to utilize communication skills and methods that may have worked in the 1950s but do not address the families nor the technology of today. We cannot expect school staff to communicate effectively if we do not provide them with an updated tool kit. That is why the subcommittee believes that professional development and training must be addressed.

We also cannot expect families and community members to know what is expected of them, what their rights and responsibilities are, and how they can help without communicating this to them.

This recommendation incorporates our core beliefs related to professional development and training, communication, technology, accountability, and partnerships.

3. We recommend the development of accountability measures, evaluations of effectiveness, and incentives for increased and more effective communication (both traditional and non-traditional) and partnership-building efforts at the state, local school system, and school levels.

These measures could include:

- Developing evaluation components for school-based staff, schools, and school systems on effective family communication and community partnerships;
- Celebrating and providing awards and incentives for all participants in school events, parent-teacher meetings, or other areas where increased involvement is sought. Parents, students, teachers, administrators, and others would be eligible for recognition;
- Creating partnerships with employers to foster support for parents and caregivers and to consider such strategies as:
 - providing tax breaks and other incentives for businesses/ industries that are family-friendly and support family involvement, and
 - creating a guide for employers that suggests how to provide support and resources to parents/caregivers and what the mutual benefits of doing so are; and

- Administering annual climate surveys to families, students, and staff that measure the school's customer service; identifying areas that need improvement; and developing strategies to address those needs.

Rationale

Our subcommittee thought long and hard about accountability related to our areas of focus. Who should be held accountable and how do you measure involvement accurately and effectively? While this area warrants much further study, we felt strongly that it be included in any recommendations stemming from the Council. Given that there are so many things competing for attention in a school, the reality is that what gets measured is what receives the most attention. If we believe that stronger communication and better partnership-building with families are key to improving student achievement—which we do—then a mechanism must be developed for measuring it.

Given that, our group also feels strongly that this accountability tool needs to be utilized to change the culture around family, school, and family involvement—not as a means of placing blame on a principal, a teacher, or any other individual. The entire concept behind M-PAC is that educators cannot, and should not, be expected to do this work alone. There must be involvement from the family and greater community. That is why we believe that, in addition to specific accountability measures, we must develop and offer positive incentives and provide data (in the form of climate surveys) to further assist the individuals who are ultimately going to be held accountable for the success of these measures.

This recommendation incorporates our core beliefs related to accountability, communication, partnerships, and technology.

Closing Statement

Our subcommittee believes that there is a strong case for increased family involvement as well as a better understanding of what family involvement entails throughout the state of Maryland. The success of any recommendations that the main Council moves forward with will rest on collaborative and thoughtful implementation. Our research clearly showed us that no single answer exists. Even as we move forward with implementing recommendations, it is our hope that the state, local school systems, and schools continue to involve scores of parents, community leaders, and others in the next steps.

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT SUBCOMMITTEE FINAL REPORT

**Final Report to Maryland's Parent Advisory Council
December 15, 2004**

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INTRODUCTION

The Parent Involvement Subcommittee of Maryland's Parent Advisory Council (M-PAC) was charged with generating recommendations in the context of strengthening parent/family involvement in education, defining what effective parent/family involvement looks like, clarifying the various ways that parents can be involved, and recommending specific programs, services and tools that schools can use to help ensure that more parents are more regularly involved in their child's education.

The subcommittee's area of focus was:

To provide parents new and innovative tools to help children with their academic studies; be advocates for their children in attendance, discipline, and other issues; and be full-fledged partners in all aspects of schooling.

Based on this area of focus, questions were generated to guide the committee's thinking as members developed their recommendations. Committee members were asked to consider what are the current research and best practices and how do they apply to the various subgroups.

PREFACE

The subcommittee was a diverse group of parent representatives from Maryland's 24 jurisdictions that worked well together as a team. The group was committed to the charge that was set forth for the Parent Involvement Subcommittee and was supportive in moving the process forward to completion. The original membership consisted of 25 members and only 3 members resigned due to job and other personal obligations. An average of 15 members out of 22 attended the 7 subcommittee meetings held from January through September 2004. Members not able to attend provided input via email. Committee members respected the views, opinions and experience of others.

Elements critical to the committee's decision-making process consisted of clarifying terms in those questions using "parent involvement" and "parent participation" and changing "parent involvement" to "family involvement;" gathering input from all subcommittee members; gathering technology information; and reviewing current parent involvement strategies and practices from all systems. Various resources aided in the committee's ability to successfully accomplish its task: (1) presentations on "Parent Involvement at the federal, state and local levels," "MD's Parent Involvement Survey," and "No Child Left Behind;" (2) observers from the national and state levels

who attended meetings to share their expertise as questions or issues were raised; (3) the dissemination of informative materials; and (4) a facilitator present at the monthly meetings who provided structure to the Question Review Process.

Several recommendations emerged dealing with some level of “communication” and “training.” The committee initially developed 18 recommendations, which were later condensed to 11 recommendations and finally narrowed to 7 recommendations to be presented to the main council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Maryland State Department of Education supports schools and school systems in the improvement of “parent-friendly,” two-way communication with families about all aspects of a child’s education. Therefore, the Parent Involvement Subcommittee recommends the following seven actions:

RECOMMENDATION ONE

Schools and school systems must provide on-site, off-site and online training to create and support a community of learners among school staff, families and community members to allow families to be strong advocates for their children and highly effective parents.

RATIONALE

Before parent involvement can be effective in increasing academic achievement in any educational setting, there must be a “buy in” by all stakeholders. Parents, caregivers, teachers, staff, school systems and the community must be part of the equation of effective parent involvement. Training tends to create and strengthen the “buy in.”

A review of Maryland school systems, in addition to comments from out-of- state parents, indicates that there are some excellent parent involvement policies in place. What is often lacking is the policy implementation. There is a need for an increase in State-level “encouragement” and modeling of parent involvement training initiatives beyond the mandatory policies. Training is only one element of the parent involvement concept; however, its value should not be minimized.

The Parent Involvement Subcommittee recommends increased emphasis and support from the State for the training of school staff, families and the community as key stakeholders. All stakeholders involved in training will benefit. Students benefit when they understand the value being placed on education by their teachers, parents and the community, and tend to be more accountable for their educational efforts. Teachers and school system employees benefit from training when they gain an increased respect for families’ strengths and the influence an informed family can have on increasing academic achievement for its children. Parents benefit as they gain self-confidence in their efforts to support their children in out-of-school environments and reinforce the curriculum presented at school. Finally, the community benefits when it takes ownership of the education being offered to children and their families.

The use of web-based enterprise software programs can serve an array of functions that include the enhancement of school-parent communication and the achievement of students’ educational goals. However, when addressing the issue of better school-parent communication, we must be sure that the

software relied upon by schools is tailored to meet the needs of the public school system, parents and children that it serves and is easily accessible. Accessibility can be hindered by the fact that some parents/families do not own computers. Considerations for enhancing accessibility may include: (1) software meant to enhance communication should be web-based and accessible from any computer with Internet access; (2) parent resource centers should be implemented in individual schools, each offering computers with Internet access (or computer labs should be made available to parents). The centers should be open to parents at all hours of the school day; (3) parents should be encouraged to use their local public library and the computers located there; and (4) partnerships should be formed with computer companies that are willing to work with the school system on overcoming the problem of inaccessibility. Perhaps State-level “encouragement” would help more schools use training as a parent involvement strategy.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

Schools and school systems must provide mandatory, job-embedded professional development for staff that includes such topics as disabilities, family advocacy, cultural diversity, and the promotion of parent involvement, interpersonal skills and customer service to ensure a parent-and family-friendly atmosphere.

RATIONALE

Decades of research have shown that parent involvement significantly contributes to students’ learning, regardless of their grade level or their parents’ socio-economic status or education level. Obstacles to parent involvement include time, cultural barriers, uncertainty about what to do and the lack of a supportive environment. According to Battered & Anderson, teachers and schools can promote parent participation by projecting a positive, welcoming attitude toward parents, establishing clear and effective communication, listening to parents express their concerns, promoting parent networks, and recognizing and appreciating different degrees of parent participation (1997). An aspect of family involvement that has been consistently overlooked is the need to prepare teachers for intensive work with families and communities. Previous case studies that were based on model programs strong in teacher preparation in family involvement have suggested reform approaches necessary to make meaningful connections among home, school, and community. Weiss, included several recommendations, such as: (1) giving prospective teachers more direct experience with families and communities; (2) making school conditions conducive to family involvement; and (3) hiring more experts in family and community involvement (1996).

Unfortunately, higher education teacher programs and school systems offer limited educational opportunities for preparing teachers to work with parents/families. Furthermore, a research study that reviewed teacher certification materials from 51 state departments of education to document parent involvement language in early childhood and K-12 certification revealed that many states do not mention working with parents or families (Weiss, 1996). Only 22 states mentioned parent involvement in their certification requirements. Few states define parent involvement in clear, precise terms and use phrases such as “parent involvement,” “home-school relations,” or “working with parents” (Weiss, 1996). Currently, Maryland does not include any required courses on parent/family involvement in its teacher certification requirements. Based on Weiss’s findings, teachers are the critical link in making family involvement a reality, and the goals for teacher training and education should have a focus on “how” they can accomplish this task.

It is essential that teachers be given more direct experiences with families and communities. We must acknowledge that coursework in family involvement is not enough. It must coincide with hands-on experience in field settings that are positive and supportive. Research suggests that the most effective strategy for preparing teachers for family involvement might be to combine coursework with early field experiences in a supportive environment (Weiss, 1996). Pre-service education is only a foundation. Professional development opportunities for teachers must be ongoing. Since fewer learning opportunities are available for school administrators and teacher education faculty, parents, administrators, teacher education faculty and other school personnel are in need of information on how to connect home, school and community resources. Multicultural, early childhood and special education courses are highly family focused; therefore, they are a natural place to integrate information on parent/family involvement. A powerful staff development initiative would recognize that if parents can be collaborators and supporters in the education of their children, school staff must become skilled in communicating with and soliciting information from parents. According to the National Staff Development Council, “staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to appropriately involve families and other stakeholders” (as cited in Murphy, 2001).

RECOMMENDATION THREE

School systems each year must provide handbooks for each grade level that include specific achievement goals for families to use as a guide when working with teachers on their child’s instructional plans during parent conferences and at home. A committee of parents and educators must review these handbooks to ensure parent-friendly language¹³.

RATIONALE

This recommendation addresses key portions of Type 1, Type 2, and Type 4 of Epstein’s six types of involvement, including setting home conditions at each grade level, effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications, and involving families with their children’s learning activities (1997). Students benefit academically from consistency between home and school strategies. Hoover-Dempsey, et al, reported that active parent/family support improves students attitudes related to achievement, such as perceptions of personal competence and self-management (2001). Schools should strive to connect classroom activities to real-world activities related to children’s home lives, thus making schoolwork more meaningful and relevant.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Schools and school systems must ensure that family involvement becomes part of annual administrator and staff evaluations. The criteria for those evaluations will be drawn from family involvement satisfaction surveys that measure the effectiveness of school partnerships, school climates and community programs, since the opinion of parents is an important indicator of educational effectiveness (Tuck, 1995).

¹³ Parent-Friendly Language – Language that is respectful of diverse cultures and abilities, easily understood and avoids the use of educational jargon.

RATIONALE

Parent/family involvement is a term that can result in a wide range of expectations. The use of a statewide, standardized survey can identify the parameters of realistic expectations and goals, as well as define ways to measure the progress achieved toward meeting those expectations and goals.

The Parent Involvement Subcommittee felt strongly that annual administrator and staff evaluations should be used to monitor continued support for parent/family involvement to ensure that support becomes integrated into the school culture. Such survey-based evaluations could become part of the school improvement plans or part of the Bridge to Excellence requirements. They would offer a qualitative analysis of a school's efforts to improve that would complement the quantitative results that testing provides. MSDE expertise would play an integral role in creating the survey and holding schools accountable for their active and ongoing support of parent/family involvement ("SICA News," 2000).

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

Schools and school systems must provide, expand and enhance family conferences to encourage more family participation and interaction in the learning process.

RATIONALE

Research has shown that positive parent-teacher relationships and open communication are vital for student success (Battle-Bailey, 2004). In Dr. Epstein's book, *School, Family and Community Partnerships*, she states that communication is a key factor in developing quality parent partnerships that in the end will promote increased student achievement (1997). One powerful way to encourage communication between the major stakeholders in our students' education is to require mandatory initial parent conferences. This will send a message to both parents and educators that communication is a key component of academic success. Making this a required practice is necessary to ensure that all parents, especially those who shy away from school interactions and teacher meetings, are encouraged to meet with the teachers.

Providing these conference opportunities is only the first step. It is important to know the facts about the changing structure of the family and consider how schools can cope to best help children (Wherry, 1996). Schools should also provide professional training and parent workshops to enhance the quality and focus of these conferences so that the outcome of the meeting will support and enhance student learning. Once a relationship has been developed at these initial meetings, it is more likely that a process of continuous communication will occur throughout the rest of the school year.

RECOMMENDATION SIX

MSDE must encourage the collaboration of public schools and community agencies to provide services such as child welfare, social services, health care, wellness centers, mental health and childcare in schools.

RATIONALE

The well-used phrase, *“It takes a village to raise a child,”* is still very true. Many children and families involved in public education have essential health and welfare needs that can stand in the way of academic achievement. If the needed services were readily available, in an environment that encourages trust, then families could receive a coordinated set of services that would set the stage for accelerated student achievement. Research has shown that school-community collaboration must be customized to the local needs of families and must draw upon local resources (Calvin, 1993). Therefore, these partnerships should be based on a holistic concept of child and family conditions in order to provide an integrated educational and social services network within the public school (Clinton, 2000). The neighborhood school is ideal for this network because it is, in many cases, the center of activity in communities.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN

MSDE must encourage school systems to establish Parent Involvement Advisory groups to advise the Board of Education on parent involvement concerns, current implementation practices, and research. The advisory group will also report to and inform parents, families and communities on Board of Education policies, parent involvement strategies, research, and best practices.

RATIONALE

To create effective parent, school and community partnerships, there must be a process to involve all stakeholders. School system leaders must have a process to receive parent and community input when creating policies and requirements. Parents, families and the community must have opportunities to offer their input to educational leaders on matters pertaining to their children’s welfare and academic achievement. Communication between all stakeholders must be meaningful and two-way. Parent Involvement Advisory groups could be a vehicle to provide opportunities for all stakeholders to communicate and be informed. Parent Involvement Advisory groups could serve in several capacities: (1) to provide local superintendents and boards of education input on the implementation of current and proposed policies; (2) to inform parents on current and proposed policies; and (3) to sponsor parent, teacher and community meetings and workshops to share research-based parent involvement best practices that may include such topics as research, parenting, family support and child development.

We believe Parent Involvement Advisory groups should to be an “officially sanctioned” or “recognized” stakeholder group consisting of parent representatives selected, supported, and valued by the local superintendents and boards of education. In the 2003-2004 school year, the Gifted and Talented Advisory group in Baltimore County was instrumental in advising and educating the local board of education on the status of the Gifted and Talented program. As a result, new policy and guidelines were created.

The Parent Involvement Subcommittee recommends that the main council consider this recommendation and include it in the final report. A Parent Involvement Advisory group in all jurisdictions would be an effective “tool” to: (1) strengthen communication; (2) promote training opportunities for families and the community; and (3) include families and the community in the decision-making process. This recommendation directly supports three of Joyce Epstein’s “Six Keys to Successful School-Family-Community Partnerships” and elements of many parent involvement initiatives nationwide.

SUMMARY

The Parent Involvement Subcommittee deems training of parents/families, teachers and other school personnel to be key and recommends that the main council incorporate training within its final recommendations. The committee recognizes that training should be “customized, tailored and adjusted” to fit the needs of a particular educational community with the possibility for on-site, off-site and online training. Furthermore, this Committee believes in the six standards of parent involvement as critical components to effective parent involvement. It is our belief that consideration of this committee’s recommendations will assist all stakeholders in strengthening the partnerships that will lead to increased academic achievement for all of Maryland’s children and families.

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